

SENATOR MEL MARTINEZ

Melquiades “Mel” Rafael Martinez was sworn in as Florida’s thirty-third United States Senator on January 4, 2005, and took his place in the history books as the first Cuban-American to serve in the U.S. Senate.

Mel Martinez has called Florida home since the age of 15 when he came to Orlando from his native Sagua la Grande, Cuba, as part of “Operation Pedro Pan,” a humanitarian program that helped Cuban children escape communist Cuba. Martinez lived with foster families who generously opened their homes to him until he was reunited with his family at age 19. This generosity of strangers has had a lasting effect on Martinez, instilling a strong sense of community and the need to give back to this country.

After graduating from Florida State University with his undergraduate and law degrees, Mel Martinez went back to his adopted hometown of Orlando where he spent the next twenty-five years practicing law, becoming a board certified trial attorney and establishing a successful law practice. Martinez also became active in many youth, civic, and community organizations.

In 1998, Martinez became Chairman (Mayor) of Orange County. While in that role, he instituted what has become known as the “Martinez Doctrine,” which ensured that no new development could take place until local schools were able to absorb the rapid growth being experienced in Central Florida.

From 2001-2004, Martinez served as the Secretary of Housing and Urban Development under President George W. Bush. At HUD, Martinez helped further the goals of an “ownership society” by promoting home-ownership for America’s low-income workers. He worked to offer the opportunity of homeownership to millions of Americans and led the effort to reform the Real Estate Settlement Procedures Act to simplify the process of becoming a homeowner by reducing paperwork and closing costs.

In 2004, Martinez moved back to his beloved Florida and successfully ran for the U.S. Senate. Senator Martinez quickly developed a reputation for working across the aisle with his Senate colleagues, effectively bringing Republicans and Democrats together for the sake of Florida and the nation. As he said the day that he was inaugurated, “I intend to represent all Floridians and be a clear voice on issues crucial to our state.”

Martinez has worked tirelessly in the 109th Congress to protect Florida’s fragile Gulf Coast from the threat of offshore drilling. He introduced legislation with fellow Florida Senator Bill Nelson that would protect Florida’s tourism economy, fragile ecosystem, and military training from offshore drilling. When it became clear that drilling proponents had the necessary support to open up Florida’s Gulf, Senator Martinez was instrumental in finding a workable solution, successfully negotiating a deal in the U.S. Senate that would put into place a 125-mile buffer zone for Florida’s Gulf, while also helping to meet our nation’s growing energy needs.

As the only immigrant in the United States Senate, Senator Martinez brought a unique perspective to the debate on how to best deal with the growing issue of undocumented workers in our country. Martinez established himself as a voice of reason—calling for a respectful tone during the debate and ensuring that any solution considered be comprehensive.

The resulting Hagel-Martinez compromise was lauded as a realistic solution to the immigration challenges facing our country. Before it was passed this spring, the Manhattan Institute's Tamar Jacoby wrote in an Op-Ed for *The Los Angeles Times* that, "The Hagel-Martinez compromise is much more than a second-best middle way. It's the sweet spot we have long been looking for — a practical, tough but also humane answer to one of the most perplexing problems we face as a nation."

Martinez is active in Cuba policy and a strong advocate of democratic reforms across the Western Hemisphere. He recognizes the place he holds in the Hispanic community as a role-model both at home and abroad. The day that Mel Martinez was sworn-in as a U.S. Senator, he said in his inaugural address, "I came to America from communist Cuba so I might have a better way of life. I wanted to live the American Dream where if you worked hard and put your mind to task, anything was possible." Martinez views the work he does on behalf of Florida's nearly 18 million residents as the culmination of his American Dream.

Senator Martinez resides in Orlando with his wife of 36 years, Kitty. They have three children and two grandchildren. Mel and Kitty are active members of St. James Cathedral Parish.